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Shaily Shashikant Patel

Smoke and Mirrors: Discourses of Magic in Early Petrine Traditions

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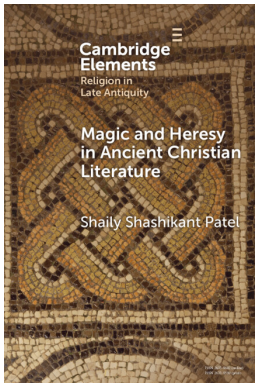

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Magic and Heresy in Ancient Christian Literature

Elements in Religion in Late Antiquity

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Laura Nasrallah
Yale University

As the study of religion turns again to the so-called esoteric and to enchantment,[1] and as scholars reconsider the limits of our inherited epistemologies, magic has come back as a hot topic. In the study of Mediterranean antiquity, Robert Daniel and Alexander Holman's *Magica Levantina* has appeared, a long-awaited publication of thirty-seven curses and one amulet from late antique Caesarea Maritima and Antioch and environs.[2] Sofía Torallas Tovar and Christopher Faraone continue to lead teams in publishing rigorous insights regarding the materiality of formularies or instructions for the production of magical objects.[3] Korshi Doosoo, along with a large team, work

1. See, e.g., Joseph Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago Press, 2017); on esotericism and mysticism and Pauline studies' connection with theosophy, see Denise Kimber Buell, "Paul the Mystic: Exploring Modern Theosophy's Legacy in New Testament and Early Christian Studies," *JAAR* 89 (2021): 1190–98.
2. Robert W. Daniel and Alexander Hollman, *Magica Levantina*, Sonderreihe der Abhandlungen Papyrologica Coloniensia 52 (Brill, 2025).
3. Christopher A. Faraone and Sofía Torallas Tovar, eds., *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies. Text and Translation*, vol. 1, California Classical Studies 9 (Department of Classics, University of California, 2022); and Faraone and Sofía

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on Coptic magical papyri.[4] Avigail Manekin-Bamberger and Simcha Gross, following on the work of Gideon Bohak and others, have made the study of incantation bowls more accessible.[5]

Shaily Shashikant Patel contributes to this magical conversation with two new books, one on the topic of magic in New Testament texts and one on the category of magic in the study of religion and the entwining of magic and heresy in the polemic of the late antique Mediterranean world.

The latter, a new Cambridge Elements volume, is short by design, part of a series edited by the eminent scholar of late antiquity Andrew Jacobs. *Magic and Heresy in Ancient Christian Literature* considers how magic functions within the construction of orthodoxy in antiquity. As Patel puts it, the object of her study is an "imperial orthodoxy, that is, the form of Christianity that eventually became the religion of the Roman Empire in 380 CE" (1). She sees magic and heresy as double, sometimes entwined, "casualties" of this rise of imperial identity and as objects of "epistemicide" or the "destruction of localized knowledges" (1). Patel treats an important topic in the study of Christian history and in the study of religion: how magic and heresy are constructed through rhetoric and polemics to exclude certain groups, practices, and identities. In this, she contributes within a long line of historiographical interventions in the topic. I think of studies as disparate as Walter Bauer's 1934 *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, translated as *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, which posited that diversity of opinions and sects *preceded* orthodoxy, and Jennifer Knust's *Abandoned to Lust*, which disclosed how gendered invective was entwined with politics against so-called heresy.[6]

Patel's *Magic and Heresy* guides the reader through an investigation of why it is that magic and heresy became entwined in antiquity. The first pages of the Elements book use Michel Foucault's idea of an episteme—a discursive formation of a given period—to analyze the fifth-century Latin-writing, North African Augustine's polemics. She argues that he and others create "a distinctively Christian épistémè; theirs is a bounded meaning-making arena, or playing field" (3). Her analysis shows how Augustine (among other ancient Christian writers) bends cosmology to do so: "He says pagan gods are angels-turned-demons who do not glorify the true God, but instead seek self-glorification by tricking humans into worshipping them" (3). She rightly notes that Augustine is not alone in his approach: other Christian writers, such as Epiphanius in Palestine/Cyprus and John Chrysostom in Antioch/Constantinople, make similar arguments, demonstrating the

Tovar, *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies. Libraries, Books, and Individual Recipes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

4. https://www.coptic-magic.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/

5. E.g., Simcha Gross and Avigail Manekin-Bamberger, "Babylonian Jewish Society: The Evidence of the Incantation Bowls," *JQR* 112 (2022): 1-30; Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

6. Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins (Fortress, 1971); Jennifer Wright Knust, *Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

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widespread nature of this discourse. Ultimately, the volume takes the reader from the first to the fourth centuries CE—those urgent decades of formative Christianity and then the beginnings of a licit/legal/recognized Christianity, some form of which comes to be adopted by the emperor Constantine (if a form that looks a lot like the worship of Apollo and the invincible sun god, but that is another story).

Patel's book is a philologically precise and intellectually capacious study of two pairs of Greek and Latin terms: αἵρεσις/*hairesis* and μαγεία/*magia*. It also includes a brief study of the verb *haireō*, which can mean to choose, even as the term *hairesis* can mean a sect or a group clustered around a certain idea or practice (16-1–8). This provides a precise, concise, and crucial study of a term that is more capacious than its polemicized use among early Christians

Patel's book moves diachronically through case studies, from Acts of the Apostles through Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*, from Hippolytus's *Refutation of Heresies* to a set of fourth-century writers that includes Augustine. The plan is clear, and the text is lithe and precise, moving from enumeration of how many times *mageia* is used as a term in Acts of the Apostles to big concepts about the evolutions of Christianities. Patel does not treat one short passage or merely one text but moves across a broad chronological and geographical sweep of ancient Christian literature. I was impressed with the range of literature, from East to West, that made it into this short book: 2 Peter, Shepherd of Hermas, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr's writings, apocryphal acts of the apostles, Tertullian, Cyprian, the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, and more. Often studies of these writings are divided up among specialists—one specializing in letters, one in fiction; another the Latin West, one the Greek East; one in very early Christian origins, another in late antique Egyptian monasticism—but Patel shows how all these works participate piecemeal in a discourse of magic and of heresy. Finally, Patel ends as she started: with metacritical reflection. The ending of the Elements book notes how accusations of satanism and a claim that others have "no religion" are mobilized in the colonial endeavors of Christianity (in this case, British imperial Christianity). It takes a lot to engage seriously the diversity of an enormous range of early Christian texts while also having a bigger, bitter history to tell.

Patel's longer volume, *Smoke and Mirrors: Discourses of Magic in Early Petrine Traditions*, focuses on constructions of the apostle Peter and the traditions surrounding him. He was, after all, the apostle to whom the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" were handed, at least according to the Gospel of Matthew. Chapters treat the Gospel of Luke, the canonical Acts, the Acts of Peter, and evidence regarding Peter and the making of orthodoxy-heresy in the Pseudo-Clementine literature. This book boldly and broadly takes on an impressive range of early Christian texts.

Magic and Heresy is the more evidently historiographic intervention, yet *Smoke and Mirrors* also displays a strong knowledge of the history of the field (with a tendency toward Anglophone conversations) and builds on the method of scholars such as Fritz Graf, Richard Gordon, and

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David Frankfurter. These scholars understand the language of magic in antiquity as both emic (and used polemically and politically against other "in" groups to reject them) and as etic—a second-order scholarly category used to organize and to evaluate, and a useful heuristic, in Patel's framework (and in conversation with classicist James Rives's work on magic).[7] The scholarship of Heidi Wendt and Jennifer Eyl,[8] which understands some early Christian leaders in light of competition over ritual expertise, is another key framework to Patel's book. In other words, *Smoke and Mirrors* is capably informed by and engaged with a range of important scholarship in the fields of ancient Christianity, the classics, and Roman history.

While keeping the focus on Peter, *Smoke and Mirrors* analyzes a broad range of the first of the fourth centuries CE and a rich set of literature that goes well beyond what we saw in the Elements book. Despite the breadth of *Smoke and Mirrors*, Patel takes time to exercise her expertise in more traditional tools of New Testament criticism, such as redaction criticism, to show how editors/rewriters carve off an earlier text for their own ideological purposes. This technical skill in New Testament scholarship will provide a good model for masters- and doctoral-level students. This volume thus not only shows readers the big picture of rhetoric, polemic, and struggles over the definition of earliest Christianity among early Christian texts but also shows them—shows us—how to do such work in concrete ways.

Smoke and Mirrors made me wish for more, either from Patel or from others following her lead: more discussion of how polemic against magic also reveals larger concerns about a variegated and unregulated medical-philosophical practices in antiquity—healings, claims of healings, recipes, volumes on pharmacology and on the body. Despite her reconsideration of the framework of orthodoxy and heresy, the book still uses terms such as "proto-orthodoxy" or "Church Fathers"; in future work, Patel can help us to move past this nomenclature.

Magic and Heresy made me thoughtful about the term *epistemicide*. I wish that the book better explained the use of this powerful term in relation to present-day scholasticides and epistemicides or left the term aside. In this book, too, the discussion of the violences wrought in the production of what Patel calls "imperial orthodoxy" could be better detailed to support this word. Is it found in the burning of books, the burning of bodies, the talking about torture? While Patel's framework of imperial orthodoxy usefully shows that religious claims to straight thinking occur alongside the strong power of empire, the term also does not account adequately for the multiple jostling claims to orthodoxy amid the most powerful, nor does it fully account for ongoing forms of Christianities, as evidenced in curses, amulets, and Christian uses of Jewish and so-called pagan ritual practices.

7. See e.g. James B. Rives, "Magic in Roman Law: The Reconstruction of a Crime," *Classical Antiquity* 22 (2003): 313–39.

8. Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

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There is much to recommend in these two books. The arc of Patel's story in both is sound and rendered through a capacious engagement with a large range of texts. In *Magic and Heresy*, we find an argument about how magic and heresy fit into a historiography of the field from late antiquity to the present. In *Smoke and Mirrors*, we see how Peter, apostolic authority, and error are entwined with the rhetoric of magic in canonical and noncanonical texts.

In this way, Patel's work fits not only among the recent editions and technical studies mentioned at the beginning of this review but also is welcome among the other scholars' cultural, social, and historical analyses. I think of Jessica Lamont's *In Blood and Ashes*, which with philological, archaeological, and historical precision treats a range of magical objects, particularly curse spells, from the classical and Hellenistic periods, or Andrew Wilburn's *Magica Materia* and its interest in magical caches and production techniques among ritual experts, or various contributions of David Frankfurter and others in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, or David Frankfurter's recent collection of essays that uses analyses of late antique magic to press on the larger question of our category of religion.[9]

Patel's two books shepherd biblical studies scholars into an important larger conversation. She brings a sharp analysis of the rhetoric of magic in ancient Christian texts and, perhaps more importantly, among texts included within the New Testament, affirming that those texts are entwined with the incantations, curses, and rituals of their contexts of production. Such work opens larger possibilities in all our research and teaching. Patel's work encourages the reader to investigate more fully how what we call ancient Christian theology and ritual participate in contemporaneous *theologies* (of god and gods) and rituals—in the practices, philosophizing, and aesthetics of humans among other matter and other beings in Mediterranean antiquity.

9. Jessica L. Lamont, *In Blood and Ashes: Curse Tablets and Binding Spells in Ancient Greece* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Andrew T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* (University of Michigan Press, 2012); David Frankfurter, ed., *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, RGRW (Brill, 2019); David Frankfurter, *Magic, Charisma and Violence in Late Antiquity: Essays in Religion*, Edinburgh Studies in Religion and Antiquity (Edinburgh University Press, 2026), esp. 1–4, 7–12 for reflections on categories.

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